MAPPING THE SONIC IMAGINARY: STACEY ROBINSON'S VISUAL CODEX

The sound of Afrofuturism, like all things connected to black speculative practice, is not easily codified. In his effort to capture the meaning of black speculative practice, Mark Dery's definition of Afrofuturism[1] relied on examples drawn from comics and hip hop. In some ways, Stacey Robinson's work and career offer a living embodiment of the transformative power of both endeavors. Stacey Robinson completed his Masters of Fine Art at the University at Buffalo and currently serves as Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His art speculates futures where Black people are free from colonial influences. Stacey's collected works reside at Modern Graphics in Berlin, Bucknell University, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Along with John Jennings, Stacey is part of the collaborative duo 'Black Kirby,' which explores Afro Speculative existence via the aesthetic of Jack Kirby. In our conversation, I asked him to reflect on the intersection of speculative practice and sound found in his art.

Julian Chambliss [JC]: I see your work exploring a pattern of innovation and intervention by black music pioneers. The subjects here: Ra, Coltrane, Clinton, Flash, and Outkast represent pivotal points of black sound innovation. Can you talk about your choices in this series and how they reflect your vision of Afrofuturism and sound?

Stacey Robinson [SR]: The pieces in this series are all parts of a much larger series looking at distinct elements to my burgeoning Black liberation through sound theorizations. I choose to make art that jumpstarts the Black imagination, thus Black conversations. I have to "make" the work to begin asking the questions myself though. The choices to create work about these individuals specifically come from examining the unique pivots, accelerations, and legacies of these artists through their praxis, thinking about how they created these tangible cultural points.

As I'm just now documenting the theoretical approach to my critical making practice, I'm clearly seeing the nexus of Black thought that has influenced the direction of my work for the last 40 years. With the George Clinton piece, for example, I'm thinking about healing in music, taking me back to when I learned that healing myself from a cold took place from sweating out the cold/flu, etc. while wearing a sweatshirt, taking medicine, and sleeping under blankets, all listening to certain types of music, which for me were always lyrically and sonically cohesive to healing. The text within the piece cites Parliament's "P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" from their 1976 album *Mothership Connection* gives the context. That's an ancestral practice spanning various cultures.

The *George* (Clinton) is from my *Talking Heads* series (yup, named after the band) is meant to inspire thoughts around discussion of health. If


WHATEVER PART OF YOUR BODY IT IS
I WANT YOU TO LAY IT ON YOUR RADIO,
LET THE VIBES FLOW THROUGH.
FUNK NOT ONLY MOVES,
IT CAN RE-MOVE. DIG?

intersectional thought is not considering mental, spiritual, emotional, financial health as part of our pleasure, gender, and sexuality conversation, then what are we actually Afrofuturing? I've had far too many conversations with Black smart people who aren't considering the implications of many sorts of inclusivity. To give one example of my recent discussions, people have asked me countless times "`where are the fat people in Wakanda?" Referring to Marvel Studios's *Black Panther* movie.

My discussion around Black Speculative discourse has to now discuss obesity as it's medically categorized, a disorder that should not exist but does due to overwork, genetically modified foods, and stress to name a few root causes. This is a root cause of diabetes. Thinking intersectionally, dialysis ain't politically pleasurable for anyone; dialysis doesn't care about our gender politics; dialysis will ignore our sexuality parameters, etc. How many Big Mamas, and Pop-Pops have we sent off into the after-life missing limbs as they quoted the Book of Acts 10: 13-15? We have to be more thoughtful in our critiques, our analysis, and our inclusivity. As Audre Lorde stated, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.[2]" As it's been remixed, "Self care is a revolutionary act." In this legacy it is imperative that we think of commandeering our good health not only as a revolutionary act, but also an Afrofuturist act. We've become very comfortable dismissing the liberation calls to action in our cultural histories and forecasted futures. I believe we are asking the wrong questions about Wakanda in reference to health, liberation, nationhood, and more. Instead of asking where the fat people are in Wakanda, for example, we should be asking how they avoided the disorder of obesity in their culture, or how they overcame it. Within the movie what we may find is that in Wakandan culture there are less work hours assigned per week for its citizens, allowing for more stress free lifestyles and exercise. We may find that Wakandan food is not genetically modified. We may also find that many Wakandans grow their own food. What we definitely notice in the movie is that their spirituality, health, science, art and nation cultures are a cohesive unified practice. The Kimoyo Beads we saw were used in a multitude of ways that represented that.

Furthermore, if attending doctor visits were a regular part of our "popular" culture as Black people, and if we as smart Black intellectuals thought and spoke more holistically about liberated Black futures, we'd readily include topics of health to our public and literary discussions on futures. I'm not suggesting that topics of health don't appear at all in our discussions, they often do, but they are regularly B, C, and D level topics. If we are not consistently, and publicly discussing health according to: better diets, exercise, mental, spiritual, financial, etc. in our thinking of future building then we are relegating the prosperity and success of our futures to career advancements via academic, or public intellectual standards which many times is built on the sacrifice of our health.

Within these regular visits to our physician we logically wouldn't dismiss our doctor using intersectional, pleasure or


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any other political rhetoric when they tell us to break up our understandably busy day with exercise, drink more water, eat more vegetables, and consider a plant-based diet. We wouldn't say "Doctor you're fat-shaming me," or "Doc your being hypermasculine, patriarchal, homophobic, misogynist, and toxic in your critique of my health, therefore I'm going to "cancel" you on social media."

In reference to my art practice, it works to a similar philosophy made public through the traditions of many of my favorite political thinkers. For example, Malcolm X who lived in his honesty, then lived again in his honesty as el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, whose belief systems were practiced publicly then transformed publicly as we witnessed his honesty in real time. I serve to build a better world through my multifaceted art practice to live as publicly in as much sincere honesty as I possibly can, with the willingness to transform when I learn of better more applicable freedom systems.

I believe we have a responsibility to our past, present and future to do more, and better, by at the very least widening our discourse and living more public, holistic examples for those who watch us.

JC: Sound and visual artists, especially those associated with Afrofuturism share traits linked to innovative intervention in techniques and drawing inspiration from the cultural legacy of blackness. How does your work attempt to capture this legacy?

SR: My visual art practice is always in a state of becoming, always at an apex of what it is at the time whether I know what the end means or not. If it's not at that level of inquiry, I know it's not what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm at a point in my practice where I'm once again looking into the roots of modern music, the scholars I grew up on, and the artists I collected. All these possess particular elements for me to extract. As Saul Williams said with 'Coded Language', "Whereas, breakbeats have been the missing link connecting the diasporic community to its drum woven past…" I'm working to extract and break the code in our language to understand what they all are cohesively.

Primarily and specifically my work intervenes on a level inspired by Emory Douglas's Political Artist Manifesto it states: #6 Create art of social concerns that even a child can understand, #7. The goal should always be the make the message clear, #9. Create art that challenges the colonization of the imagination.

My work also intervenes by looking to begin to define Blackness and Black liberation. Ironically I also theorize that we can't define our Blackness inside of a space we currently reside, where the descendants of those who colonized, displaced, and enslaved our ancestors nor benefit from the generational wealth through labor, inventions, and intellectual property of our past contributions.

My own theorization is an innovation of Black time travel, rooted in my intersections of beliefs that we've brought across the middle passage like the Bakongo Cosmogram for example, and systems we've created inside of western colonialism as celebrational and communal remembrances


BLACK
LIVES
MATTER!

from our ancestral home like the Nguzo Saba, to contemporary systems of the Black Power Movement like the 12 Jewels from the 5% Nation of Gods and Earths. These operate with Hip-Hop's 4 primary elements, my own, calling, family responsibilities, and community obligations. In tandem with this thinking, innovation, and intervention is also a thinking of invention. I believe Blackness looks and sounds like a particular thing. There is a legacy of traditions I work in. You see Pedro Bell, Overton Lyod, Ernie Barnes, Romare Beardon, Sylvia St. James, and Emory Douglas as visual shout outs in my work.

The *Grandmaster Flash* explores his contribution to music through his redesign and repurpose of technology to meet his vision of creating a never-ending space of dance through what would later be known as the beat break. I believe that functions as an infinite cosmogram that I want the audience to explore when they make their deep dives into the past to excavate more stolen, misplaced, and hidden legacies. I hope the audience thinks about various design disciplines and looks at our existing and their emerging art and theoretical languages to create what White supremacists have consistently destroyed, our personhood and safe, brave spaces.

JC: As a visual artist, your work operates at the intersection of practice and theory. I know your work is inspired by a critical race design studies approach that is dependent, in some small way, on visual anthropology to understand the black experience. How do these works align with that critical framework?

SR: Paraphrasing on the Book of James 2:17, Faith without works is dead. I put work behind my belief system. I believe Black liberation exists as a functioning algorithm. Just as White supremacy is a philosophy supported by a functional ideology of racism, enforced in religion, primary through higher education, neighborhood (many times militarized) policing, government legislature, and popular culture. My spiritual calling is to excavate that algorithm from where it's buried, under all our miseducation and hidden his/herstory.

The Black experience is not singular. Our skin tones have functioned as technological vehicles of escorting white supremacist fears and fantasies in their same contradictive inescapable imaginings. What accompanies the melanin foundation of all earth's inhabitants is the Black founded creations of civilization including medicine, philosophy, mathematics, language, religion, music, agriculture, and more. Locked in our DNA are Henrietta Lacks's healing cells, slavemaster's forced inclusion, and our ability to survive under hundreds of years of colonial influence with the lack of restorative justice. With Black DNA are the key holders of White people's fears and fantasies to unlock what Dr. Frances Cress Welsing described in her book *The Isis Papers*[3] as White people's fear of "genetic annihilation."

Sun Ra with a Harriet Jesus Piece imagines the foundational Afrofuturist practitioner as a pyramid ship taking us to a location of self-discovery on the "other side of time." Inspired by Harriet Tubman, a gold rope chain hangs around Sun Ra's neck, her icon is our

reminder of Sun Ra's mission to free Black people just as he sought to in his 1974 film *Space is the Place*.

JC: What do you hope the public will think about after encountering these images?

SR: My main hope is when people view my work that we honestly think and discuss how we can liberate ourselves from oppression. I believe freedom looks, tastes, smells, feels, and sounds like a very particular thing. As a visual artist working in the tradition of my inspirations like Emory Douglass, Synthia Saint James, Romare Bearden, Cheik Anta Diop, Chancellor Willams, John Henrik Clark, my great grandmother, my mom, my aunt, my children, and the women who entrusted me with the primary bulk of my record collection to name a few, my goal is to present a visual aesthetic that speaks a language of Black self- created holistic liberated futures. I hope the future examines it, critiques it, remixes it, adds to it without changing the heart of it.

I think as Black public intellectuals and academic scholars we collectively have an unbalanced relation to Black intersectionality. The topics of pleasure, gender, sex, pop cultural critique, and even Afrofutures are hot topics we should explore (and secure our public and academic carriers with). But until we define what our freedom is, contract our relationships with outer and inner influential nations, define our liberation parameters, and seriously discuss what Black nationhood means, Blackness will always exist as something outside, in addition to those intersections that have already been defined, and now being redefined. Excluding defining what Blackness is within intersectionality means relying on what is defined by our oppressors definition, Blackness being the antithesis of Whiteness with all its philosophically White supremacist, and systemically racist implications. It also means relying on the oppressor's consistently failed moral and ethical code in hopes that it'll align with ours.

Therefore I want our audience to challenge our Black intellectual arguments. If we are not reaching the community then what we do academically is only self and campus serving. I want our audience to be inspired to make their imaginings of Black liberated futures starting with themselves. I don't want my audience to rely on me to make what they don't see here. I also want the audience to research my work before resting on an assumption that what they see is the totality of my commentary.

I hope the audience will converse topical issues like racial profiling as what it is, racially based, not gender, pleasure, or sexually based. Those other bases are connected first to Blackness. For example, the storming of the capital on January 6, 2020, was an assassination attempt by hundreds of White people who I imagine identified across sexual and gender spectrums, yet unified under White supremacy because they understand what a BIPOC governing power looks like through new equitable legislation.

Ultimately though, I'm thinking about a future generation when I'm making this work. I'm specifically working in the traditions of our elders and ancestors when making this work; in a contemporary

contextualization, I'm using very accessible digital and traditional mediums while theorizing with a future generation in mind that I'll only interact with in the after-life. The audience of the future will take what they need from my work. I believe they will use what is good for them as they define their existence.

The *John Coltrane* a portrait originally for the Burchfield Penney Museum in Buffalo NY, is a sacred geometry practitioner who inspired the God EMCEE Rakim through a pattern of complex notes which theoretically could not be played simultaneously on the saxophone. Just as what was imagined as impossible with existing technology, I want the audience to build upon that thinking, to see the possible, to imagine better, more equitable tomorrows.

As I'm [thinking through] this, I'm traveling through a sound collage of music spanning *One Nation Under a Groove*, *The Best of Andrae Crouch and the Disciples*, and Louie *Vega's Lockdown Sessions* on Worldwide FM. via Twitch TV. My critical making practice works in a tradition of sonic residences that extract from the African spirit. Most of my inspirational sound experiences are part of my album collection, my MP3 DJ library, and cross referenced discoveries. They visually align along a tradition of authors, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and systems makers that concern themselves with Black freedom through their unique practices. I want the audience to hear the sound and feel healing through the visual aesthetics.

Moving forward

I'm taking a much deeper dive into some of my more obscure favs. Figures I need to spend more time with who aren't always mentioned in Afrofuturism. Grace Jones, Missy Elliot, and Jean Grae are not an afterthought but require a much deeper dive into their catalogues, and commentary. Again, I am making art of the inspirational greats as I excavate their thoughts. These works in progress represent a few of the newer portraits that I'm still considering, crafting, and communicating.

Grace Jones

The Grace Jones portrait is a work in progress that as many of [my] newer works represents a state of becoming, transcendence and evolution. As I'm making this work, I'm refamiliarizing myself with her catalogue. Still my fav work of hers is "Operattack" from her 1985 album *Slave to the Rhythm*. This piece is a House music/Disco classic. I first became familiar with this work in 1990, in my house music, club dancing days. The echoed scream of "Slave" continuously overlapping, reverberating at points becomes inaudible when intermingled with the words ``annihilating rhythm" which in various pitches at the end becomes horrific in a sense and leaves us there with no resolve. At the central point of her performance, Jones then goes into what seems like a series of vocal thrusts; listening to it, I feel a sense of pain in her a cadence reminiscent of a chain gang laying miles of train tracks in rhythm while surviving the moment. The chant becomes faster, almost becoming a different sound through the layered staccato. The stereo sound production bounces back and forth through from


SLAUGHTER-SLAUGHTER, OF THEM POCKETS, HAD TO TIE HER TO A ROCKET, SEND HER INTO OUTER SPACE.
NO LOOKING BACK, SPACESHIPS DON'T COME EQUIPPED WITH REAR VIEW MIRRORS, THEY DIP AS QUICK AS THEY CAN, THE ATMOSPHERE IS NOW RIPPED.
COLORED CA
BLACK KIRBY
OUTKAST

both ears, while the following "Dance to the Rhythm" command reverberates much deeper yet calls to much higher. The vocal thrusts return to then do the same. There is so much more layered depth to Jones's work. For example, her performance in the 1992 film *Boomerang* leaves us with classic quotables of her irresistible sexual power, but my favorite part was always her arrival to the party that draws the attention of the guests as the helicopter lowers a crate the opens to reveal her exit a chariot drawn by 4 White men wearing bondage-style leather, led by her lashing them with a whip. This control of not only men but white men glitches the sexual politics of race, gender, power, and fantasy. In another, Jones give birth to her self-named perfume "Strangé" a fragrance that represents the "essence of sex." The scene, a commercial within the film art directed by multifaceted artist Geoffrey Holder, is a mix of horror and fantasy that in today's viewing could be categorized as Afrofuturist.

Missy Elliott

This work in progress represents Missy Elliott through a Romare Bearden-style collage that seeks to be as strange as her music video aesthetics. The artistic legacy of Missy is unmatched. Her unique videography parallels her lyrical prowess consistent with science-fiction themed aesthetics. Among her most popular of approaches is the bending of time, space, place, and gravity combined with motifs that honor classic Hip-Hop elements: with an overwhelming sense of fun and community. You feel her approach to the pioneering Hip-Hop principles of Afrika Bambaataa's ideas of "Peace, Unity, Love and Having Fun." Missy consistently reaches back to the upcoming generation, centering a young girl soloing her agency and defining power. While many artists rest in the idea of rapping, Missy exemplifies Hip-Hop as a cultural power. Finalizing the work will point to these ideas as her legacy while leaving room to imagine what she can become and what message she will have for us.

Jean Grae

Another lyrical powerhouse, Grae (born Tsidi Ibrahim) is positioned as another lyricist who when I categorized Hip-Hop greats according to gender would like Missy, appear in my top 10 of dopest Hip-Hop artists. Her homage to Marvel Comics's X-Men character Jean Grey, aka the Phoenix, explores Grae's personification of herself as the Phoenix. This work in progress piece shows Grae, collaged with Grey, as the Dark Phoenix, at the height of Grey's power status when she possessed the power of the comic *Phoenix Force*. Her personification inspired by comics falls into a legacy of emcees who rebirth themselves through comics-based personifications. Other rappers who have reinvented themselves include MF DOOM, Ghostface Killer (aka Tony Starks), Method Man (aka Johnny Blaze), and many others. In the piece, the screw-faced lyricist wields a spell of two Sankofa, the Ghanaian adinkra symbol meaning "to go back and fetch it, "which represents going back to fetch our stolen, buried, and appropriated legacy through knowledge


JeanGrae

education. Sankofa symbols face each other as a double entendre, representing existing in past, present, and future simultaneously. The Phoenix's "Dark Sankofa" spell when cast on haters will...well stay tuned.

End Notes

[1] Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 92, no. 4, Fall 1993, p. 735-738.
[2] Lorde, Audre*. A Burst of Light : Essays*. Firebrand Books, 1988.
[3] Welsing, Frances Cress. *The Isis (Yssis) Papers*. 1st ed., Third World Press, 1991.